



# ACCESS & QUALITY



**START STRONG COUNCIL FINAL REPORT AUGUST 2007**

**AT ITS FINAL MEETING IN JULY OF 2007,  
THE COUNCIL APPROVED AND PRESENTED SIX  
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNOR KAINE:**

**Virginia should develop a coordinated approach to delivery of a high quality preschool program by development of a state level office to consolidate existing relevant early childhood programs; and should engender collaborative leadership councils at the local level.**

**Virginia should adopt a voluntary 5-star rating system that promotes program quality based on the statewide QRIS developed by the Alignment Project team for preschool programs in both public and private settings. Phased-in implementation of the initiative should be supported through pilots in diverse communities and settings as well as adequate funding for technical assistance and mentoring to meet quality standards. State-funded preschool programs serving four-year olds should be held accountable for meeting a minimum quality rating.**

**Virginia should use both direct investment and incentives to build capacity and raise quality in the early childhood education system over a period of three to five years, taking into account the direct and indirect costs of providing high quality preschool programs in a comprehensive early childhood system, including effective program administration, evaluation, quality assurance, technical assistance and monitoring, and workforce development costs.**

**Virginia should support a coordinated system of professional development in order to ensure a strong early childhood professional workforce.**

**Virginia should adopt a common definition of school readiness that is accepted and supported by all early childhood programs in both the public and private sector in order to facilitate the development of a common approach to evaluate pre-K program performance as well as the school readiness of Virginia's children.**

**Virginia should work with business, education, and philanthropic organizations to broaden public understanding of early childhood education, helping to explain its long-range social and economic importance for all citizens.**

**Start  
Strong**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**





# ACCESS AND QUALITY

ARE KEY, ACCORDING TO THE START STRONG COUNCIL, WHICH CONCLUDED ITS INTENSIVE STUDY OF PRESCHOOL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMONWEALTH IN JULY OF 2007. AT THE COUNCIL'S FINAL MEETING, MEMBERS APPROVED AND PRESENTED SIX OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE FOR STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO HIGH QUALITY PRESCHOOL FOR VIRGINIA.

The Council spent several diligent months exploring brain and economic research, examining landmark studies and recent studies about the effects of pre-K on children who participate and children who do not, and digging deep to understand the barriers and the potential of the fragmented system of private and public providers that currently exists. They also took a look at trends and strategies in other countries and in other states. In concluding their work, the Council reaffirmed its initial finding, reported in December of 2006, that investment in early childhood education offers strong and valuable benefits to children, schools, communities, the workforce, the economy, and the Commonwealth.





The network supports and is supported by quality options for parents, communicating with families and engaging them as consumers and as primary stewards of their child's growth and development.

Recommendations of the Council address components or features of a successful, high-quality preschool system. Because they are convinced that preschool is a worthy investment in human capital at the most fertile time of brain development in life, the Council focused its attention on strategies for increasing access while at the same time keeping quality as a top priority. In all studies of success, features of high quality are evident as key ingredients.

As the Council progressed in its work, the picture of Virginia's successful system began to emerge. True to Governor Kaine's original vision, the system taking shape is a network – one characterized by partnership between public schools and private providers. It's a web that is woven with strong support connecting a sound, focused state infrastructure to local leadership displayed through advisory councils. These local councils are made up of diverse leaders who together craft systemic preschool plans that meet the comprehensive needs of children and take advantage of unique strengths of each community.

The successful system utilizes varied and innovative financing mechanisms to increase access in steady, thoughtful steps. Both direct and indirect investments are critical to achieving a preschool network that upholds quality standards and is increasingly accessible to four-year-olds in the Commonwealth.

Most of all, the preschool network is one that achieves quality standards that determine its ability to prepare children with school readiness skills that set them on a path of success. The network supports and is supported by a strong, capable early childhood workforce. The network supports and is supported by a mechanism to measure, display, encourage, and reward quality in both public and private settings. The network supports and is supported by high quality options for parents, communicating with families and engaging them as consumers and as primary stewards of their child's growth and development. The network supports and is supported by communities, engaging business, education, philanthropic and human services leaders in making investments that yield strong benefits for children and families, schools, communities, the workforce, and the economy.

The preschool network suggested by the Council has a solid commitment to articulating clear goals, measuring progress, and communicating results. Virginia's preschool system will be informed by these findings and evaluations to guide its movement toward its goals of increased access and quality.

### *Initial Work of the Start Strong Council*

Early in his term, Governor Timothy M. Kaine established, by executive order, the Start Strong Council, comprised of legislators, representatives from the public school system, private providers of early childhood education programs, elected local government officials, community and business leaders, and parents. The Council was given the responsibility to explore the benefits and opportunities of expanding access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds in Virginia, and to bring specific recommendations for strategic expansion of access to high quality preschool in the Commonwealth.

Governor Kaine's charge to the Council reflected his vision that the voluntary Start Strong initiative would involve both public schools and private programs to utilize the capacity and capability for high quality services in the private sector, maximizing the use of resources for services rather than bricks and mortar. The Governor envisioned cultivation of local leadership councils to plan systemically for local preschool networks and affirmed the importance of ensuring a high quality program.

The Council began an intensive exploration in June 2006, served by six task forces made up of more than 75 individuals representing various constituencies and areas of expertise. The first few months began with an examination of the research outlining the impact on individuals, communities, the public school system, the workforce, and the economy from investment in early childhood education. The Council reviewed findings from landmark longitudinal studies including the Abecedarian project, the High Scope/Perry Preschool initiative, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers; the economic research of Dr. James Heckman, Dr. Art Rolnick, and the Committee for Economic Development; and findings of relevant brain research by Dr. Jack Shonkoff and others.

The Council reviewed the status of existing programs in Virginia, including the varied child care and preschool offerings in the private, faith-based, and home-based communities; state-funded Virginia Preschool Initiative for at-risk four-year-olds; the federally-funded Head Start program and the child care subsidy program. An analysis of current placement of four-year-olds in Virginia was conducted, along with the barriers to accessing optimal learning environments for children.

The Council also explored early childhood education in other countries and across the United States, learning about how countries and states have varied in their approaches to maximizing learning opportunities for very young children. Finally, the Council reviewed recent findings from preschool initiatives in other states, including those that target at-risk (typically by income level) children and those that are more inclusive of children in a range of socio-economic situations.

*The Council began an intensive exploration in June 2006, served by six task forces made up of more than 75 individuals representing various constituencies and areas of expertise.*



In its initial review of existing programs in Virginia, an understanding of barriers emerged. To overcome the barriers discerned, the Council explored various ideas and strategies. In December, the Council released a report outlining its initial findings and recommendations. The primary recommendation was to launch a pilot initiative to test the use of strategies identified to overcome barriers to full and expanded access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds in the Commonwealth.

The Start Strong Council finds that increasing investment in early childhood education through expanded access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds holds the potential for desirable returns including greater school readiness, higher school achievement, and stronger employment opportunities, resulting in impressive benefits for the Commonwealth.

—Initial Report of the Start Strong Council, December 2006

### *Pilot Initiative*

Governor Kaine proposed funding for a preschool pilot to the 2007 General Assembly, and an allocation of \$2.6 million was secured for the purpose of conducting pilots to test innovative strategies in the delivery of early childhood services, building on the Virginia Preschool Initiative. Appropriation Act language specified as eligible those communities that had a pre-existing partnership between the public school and non-profit or private partners for delivery of preschool services.

The pilots, planned for the 2007-08 academic year in 10 of 12 eligible communities, will serve as a feasibility test for strategies the Council believes will help in overcoming some of the barriers that exist to maximization of the existing preschool programs. The initiative will serve roughly 300 additional at-risk students in Albemarle (12 students), Alexandria (61), Alleghany (24), Bath (17), Chesapeake (10), Fairfax (65), Hampton (90), Highland (4), Richmond County (6) and Virginia Beach (20). Included in the pilot initiative are a number of the strategies to serve more eligible children. Bath, Highland, and Alleghany, for example, are providing strong models for integration of VPI and Head Start funding within the same classrooms. Hampton will deliver preschool services in three religious facilities, a military setting, a university child care center, and several private centers. Albemarle will partner with one proprietary and one non-profit private center. Fairfax, a community that has modeled the “network” approach for many years, will show innovation in attempting a family child care pilot for 15 children, who will have preschool experiences in an established home network. In a community where both school space and private center space have reached capacity, this home-based model for preschool delivery is significant. It also provides a desirable option for families more comfortable with a home-based setting. Two sites will serve children in a full-year program.



At least five of the pilot communities will use a sliding scale to incorporate parent tuition. At least seven have raised local funds to participate in the Quality Ratings System.

It is projected that the initiative will not utilize the full \$2.6 million allocated. Since only twelve sites were eligible, and due to challenges of timing and securing the local match, the number of students communities are able to serve in the pilot initiative is limited.

### *The Council's Conclusion*

Following the release of the initial report, the Council and task forces continued their work in discerning the structural and other barriers to full maximization of resources for preschool in Virginia, as well as the opportunities present for increasing both access and quality in a preschool network. The final seven months of exploration yielded a set of strategic recommendations presented to the Governor at the Council's final meeting in July. Concepts and details of each recommendation are presented in the following report.



The pilot initiative will serve roughly 300 at-risk students in ten cities and counties across the Commonwealth. The program will use assets in a variety of settings, including religious facilities and private centers.





# THE VISION: VIRGINIA'S PRESCHOOL NETWORK

**THE NETWORK IS A WEB THAT IS WOVEN WITH STRONG SUPPORT CONNECTING A SOUND, FOCUSED STATE INFRASTRUCTURE TO LOCAL LEADERSHIP DISPLAYED THROUGH ADVISORY COUNCILS.**

While some excellent preschool programs exist in Virginia, the overall system of early childhood education is fragmented and inefficient. By addressing preschool delivery in a network approach, Virginia has the opportunity to maximize the resources and capabilities of a diverse array of public and private programs supporting the care and education of “at-risk” preschool children. Each program brings unique strengths and characteristics; the variety of settings has the distinct advantage of offering parents and families a range of options for care and education environments for their young children. A governance structure that recognizes and supports these unique characteristics and promotes parental choice would enable optimal integration and coordination of existing programs and providers.

Private care and education programs include for profit and non-profit child care centers, home-based child care, private and Montessori preschools, community centers, and faith-based programs. Many programs are required to be licensed by the Virginia Department of Social Services and in compliance with the regulations set forth by that agency. Faith-based programs may be determined to be religiously-exempted from regulation; home-based centers serving fewer than six children are not required to be licensed. There are various associations for each constituent group, yet because of variance in the ownership, oversight, management, and regulation of these programs, there is no centralized system.



Three major public programs supporting the delivery of early childhood services in Virginia are the child care subsidy program, Head Start, and the Virginia Preschool Initiative. While the public programs noted are each aimed at providing education



services for low income children often at-risk of school failure, they represent a fragmented system with inconsistent educational goals and practices. At present, the programs have differing income criteria, program requirements, staff qualifications, oversight systems, match requirements, governance structures, and expectations for comprehensive family services. The programs have separate technical assistance and support mechanisms, and competition among programs for students can exist. There can be limited coordination between state and local levels and a lack of communication among public and private programs.

Other states have faced and addressed similar challenges; the Council looked for lessons learned from the experience of several states in recommending a more effective governance structure to address early childhood education opportunities in Virginia. Several states have chosen to consolidate the existing relevant early childhood education programs into either a newly created office within an existing department or to bring the programs and functions together into a new state agency.

The Council has determined that the goals could best be met by the development of an early learning office with an advisory Board selected by the Governor to provide policy direction. In Virginia, the Governor's Working Group has provided initial cross-agency integration at a policy level. The Board could build on the current membership of the Governor's Working Group to include additional members from the nonprofit and provider communities to move from solely a policy focus to an operational one.

In terms of local governance, the Start Strong Council recommends the cultivation of advisory councils at the local level, bringing together public and private education and service leaders as well as consumers of early childhood education services to determine community needs, plan systemically, and make decisions about how best to serve the early childhood education needs of its citizens. The local council would determine the fiscal and operating agent for the preschool funding and will provide guidance to assist the operating agency in achieving its goals and objectives. It would assemble key partners to the planning table, determine pre-K service providers in both public and private settings, determine jurisdictional boundaries for application and apply for grant funding, and ensure quality monitoring and evaluations.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #1**

Virginia should develop a coordinated approach to delivery of a high quality preschool program by development of a state level office to consolidate existing relevant early childhood programs; and should engender collaborative leadership councils at the local level.

*The state level office should receive policy direction by an advisory Board selected by the Governor and should be accountable to a specified administrator. The Board should be made up of members of the Governor's Working Group as well as additional members from the nonprofit and provider communities.*

*The Council has determined that the goals could best be met by the development of an early learning office with an advisory Board selected by the Governor to provide policy direction.*

## THE NETWORK SUPPORTS AND IS SUPPORTED BY A STRONG, CAPABLE, EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE.

The key determinant of quality in a learning setting is the teacher. The knowledge, competencies, and skills of the adult guide in a classroom are the ingredients that make learning come alive for young children, supporting the continuum of skill development and acquisition toward school readiness.

To build and maintain a strong pool of effective teachers, a coordinated system of training, professional development, and mentoring is needed.

### **RECOMMENDATION #2**

Virginia should support a coordinated system of professional development in order to ensure a strong early childhood professional workforce.

- A. Working with relevant agencies and institutions, increase availability and access to appropriate education and training programs aligned with competencies identified as desirable for early childhood professionals.*
- B. Develop appropriate professional licensure, credentialing, and certifications as well as relevant programs to acquire these designations. Develop and promote a user-friendly career lattice to facilitate professional development planning.*

## THE NETWORK SUPPORTS AND IS SUPPORTED BY A MECHANISM TO MEASURE, DISPLAY, ENCOURAGE, AND REWARD QUALITY IN BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SETTINGS. THE NETWORK IS SUPPORTED BY AND SUPPORTS HIGH-QUALITY OPTIONS FOR PARENTS, COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES AND ENGAGING THEM AS CONSUMERS AND AS PRIMARY STEWARDS OF THEIR CHILD'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

The five standards proposed in the Star Quality program—education, qualifications and training; interactions; staff to child ratio and group size; learning environment and instructional practices; and partnering with families and communities—have indicators that must be achieved for each Star rating. These standards and indicators have been selected as a result of a thorough review of the research literature and best practices in other states. A strong body of research suggests that early care and education programs that focus on improving in ways aligned with these five standards yield positive outcomes for children.

The Star Quality program would award either First Step status or one, two, three, four, or five stars to programs, similar to how restaurants and hotels are rated, based on achievement in each of the five standards. This user-friendly rating would be a powerful consumer education tool for parents, informing them about quality as they consider options of child care and preschool programs for their children.

Programs would be assessed by trained and experienced Star Quality Raters, who would be regularly rated themselves for consistency and reliability. Thorough and systematic on-site visits would be conducted by the Raters to determine which Star level designation a facility will receive and to insure consistency among programs, providing improved information and accountability for parents.

The proposed Virginia's Star Quality initiative would provide programs a roadmap for continuous quality improvement. Supports, like trained mentors assigned to each provider and financial incentives tied to particular Star levels, would assist programs as they improve their quality and move up to the next Star level. Participation in the initiative would give programs the positive community recognition they deserve for their continued dedication to achieving higher standards and improving quality.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3**

Virginia should adopt a voluntary 5-star rating system that promotes program quality based on the statewide QRIS developed by the Alignment Project team for preschool programs in both public and private settings. Phased-in implementation of the initiative should be supported through pilots in diverse communities and settings as well as adequate funding for technical assistance and mentoring to meet quality standards. State-funded preschool programs serving four-year olds should be held accountable for meeting a minimum quality rating.

- A. The QRIS should address staff qualifications, classroom interactions, the learning environment, instructional practices, and partnerships with families and communities, and should include mechanisms for quality assessment, technical assistance for quality improvement, and reporting for all participating programs.*
- B. State-funded programs should be required to achieve a minimum quality rating.*



Virginia's **Star Quality Initiative** is a proposed voluntary quality rating and improvement system which will use licensing as a foundation and set a continuum of clearly identified Star levels of increasing quality.

Under the leadership of the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, the Alignment Project (an effort to bridge the gap between private child care and public schools) has been working to promote a seamless continuum of care and education for Virginia's young children. One of the tasks of the Alignment Project was to develop Virginia's QRIS as a market-based approach to evaluate and encourage quality in early childhood learning programs across a wide range of settings. The QRIS features five standards for center-based programs, which will be rated on a five-star scale. These are based on the previous work of the Alignment Project in developing the Milestones of Child Development and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals.



By holding preschool programs accountable according to a statewide standard, we will be able to provide high-quality services to all pre-K students.





The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) is a public-private partnership, founded in 2005, that supports local and regional efforts to build a comprehensive system of high quality early care, education and health services that are accessible to all parents and caregivers in the Commonwealth. By using a combination of public and private funds, VECF brings an intelligent, measurable, and results-oriented approach to investments that increase school-readiness. The goal of the Foundation is that all children arrive at kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and in life.

## A SUCCESSFUL SYSTEM UTILIZES VARIED AND INNOVATIVE FINANCING MECHANISMS TO INCREASE ACCESS IN STEADY, THOUGHTFUL STEPS.

Both direct and indirect investments are critical to achieving a preschool network that upholds quality standards and is increasingly accessible to four-year-olds in the Commonwealth.

Direct investment is needed to develop the early childhood education workforce through funding of community college and university degree and certificate programs and in-service professional development programs. Direct investment in quality improvement through public and private support of a quality ratings system should be encouraged. Resources should be provided to support the infrastructure for rating and monitoring programs, and for technical assistance and financial incentives to help providers raise the quality of their programs.

The Council finds that private providers of high quality early childhood education, both for-profit and non-profit, should be welcomed as valued partners that can help meet the needs of local communities. These organizations should be included in comprehensive early childhood networks and should be encouraged to participate in publicly-funded programs. In addition to contributing additional capacity and infrastructure, these providers offer the potential for blended classrooms with a broad range of pupils.

Businesses and philanthropic organizations are rising to the challenge of supporting expanded access to quality preschool in their communities. These organizations should be treated as valued partners to the public sector as well, and their contributions should be encouraged through incentives.

### RECOMMENDATION #4

Virginia should use both direct investment and incentives to build capacity and raise quality in the early childhood education system over a period of three to five years, taking into account the direct and indirect costs of providing high quality preschool programs in a comprehensive early childhood system, including effective program administration, evaluation, quality assurance, technical assistance and monitoring, and workforce development costs.

#### DIRECT INVESTMENT:

*A. Though the Council finds that benefits from high quality preschool accrue to children of both lower- and middle-income families and to children with varied risk factors, state and local government funding should be targeted initially to increase access for children who are at risk of educational failure, many of whom are not served by the existing Virginia Preschool Initiative.*

*B. State policies should promote braiding of multiple funding streams, encouraging programs to leverage state, federal, and local preschool and child care subsidy funds, private grant funds, private tuition payments, and other sources to support early childhood education programs and wraparound services (before and/or after school child care) to meet the needs of working families. Parents should contribute to the cost of preschool education to the extent they can afford it. Sliding scale and fixed tuition schedules expand access to programs and create economically diverse classrooms for preschool children; these models should be evaluated and replicated as appropriate to expand access to quality preschool more broadly.*

**INCENTIVES:**

- A. Virginia should provide incentives for individuals to gain the education, training and skills necessary to provide high-quality early childhood education. Incentives for this purpose may include tuition assistance, subsidized student loans, loan forgiveness programs, tax deductions and/or credits and increased compensation based on educational attainment.*
- B. Virginia should provide incentives for private sector partners to develop the facilities to accommodate expanded access to quality preschool. As well, incentives could be provided to encourage employers and private child care providers to develop and maintain high quality preschool programs, or to raise the level of quality in existing programs, by creating business tax credits or deductions linked to program quality ratings (QRIS). Relevant incentives should be provided for faith-based and other non profit providers as well.*
- C. Virginia should continue to provide incentives for parents to select high quality preschool opportunities for their children, and should promote existing federal and state tax benefits for this purpose.*
- D. Virginia should consider financial incentives in high composite index localities to help them expand access to pre-kindergarten programs.*



An investment in high quality early childhood education is an investment in the future success of the Commonwealth and its citizens.

**THE NETWORK SUGGESTED BY THE COUNCIL HAS A SOLID COMMITMENT TO ARTICULATING CLEAR GOALS, MEASURING PROGRESS, AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS. VIRGINIA'S PRESCHOOL SYSTEM WILL BE INFORMED BY THESE FINDINGS AND EVALUATIONS TO GUIDE ITS MOVEMENT FROM COMPETENCE TO EXCELLENCE.**

A critical goal of quality pre-K programs is to prepare all children to arrive at kindergarten with the strongest possible foundation for learning. That foundation, otherwise known as school readiness, improves a child's potential for success in early elementary school grades and beyond. When children arrive to school with large differences in school readiness, both better prepared and less prepared children suffer. Unprepared children struggle to keep pace with learning along with their peers. Prepared children must wait while resources and energy are spent helping less prepared children catch up, an effort that takes a toll on the child, the teacher, and the classroom.

While some jurisdictions have taken steps to evaluate school readiness and pre-K program effectiveness at the local level, there is not a consistent, comprehensive, state-wide assessment to evaluate how well prepared Virginia children are when they begin kindergarten. The absence of this data limits the state's ability to determine how well pre-K programs, including the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), foster the development of skills that children need to enter school ready to learn.

An annual school readiness report would provide the public, policy makers, educators and early childhood professionals with clear information about the readiness of children as they begin kindergarten, the benefits of high quality pre-K toward promoting school readiness, and the effectiveness of state-funded programs in influencing the skills children bring with them to kindergarten.

A School Readiness Task Force would guide the preparation of the report and provide recommendations to increase the availability and accessibility of high quality pre-K for Virginia's children. A Virginia School Readiness Report and School Readiness Task Force are particularly important for providing a proper framework for responding to the clear gap in readiness that exists between various groups of children when they enter kindergarten. Understanding and closing this readiness "gap" is essential for ensuring that all children are prepared to make the most of their elementary education.



#### **RECOMMENDATION #5**

Virginia should adopt a common definition of school readiness that is accepted and supported by all early childhood programs in both the public and private sector in order to facilitate the development of a common approach to evaluate pre-K program performance as well as the school readiness of Virginia's children.

- A. Virginia should develop a strong infrastructure to support pre-K and school readiness evaluation, including adequate funding for a regular statewide program evaluation using developmentally appropriate assessments that help us to ensure programs that provide high quality experiences for children.
- B. Virginia should contract with a qualified college, university, or research institution to prepare an annual Virginia School Readiness Report that will assess the status of kindergarten children's readiness. The report will illustrate the role of pre-K and related programs in preparing children for kindergarten, and shall examine students' literacy, math and socio-emotional skills, while taking into account differences in student backgrounds. The report shall also seek alignment with the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).
- C. Virginia should create a school readiness task force to direct the preparation and use of the School Readiness Report and make recommendations to enhance children's access to high quality pre-K.

*School readiness improves a child's potential for success in early elementary school grades and beyond.*

*When children arrive to school with large differences in school readiness, both better prepared and less prepared children suffer.*

**THE NETWORK SUPPORTS AND IS SUPPORTED BY COMMUNITIES, ENGAGING BUSINESS, EDUCATION, PHILANTHROPIC AND HUMAN SERVICES LEADERS IN MAKING INVESTMENTS THAT YIELD STRONG BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES, THE WORKFORCE, AND THE ECONOMY.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION #6**

Virginia should work with business, education, and philanthropic organizations to broaden public understanding of early childhood education, helping to explain its long-range social and economic importance for all citizens.



**We are grateful for the following individuals or organizations and their contributions:**

- Katherine Busser for her leadership as Start Strong Council Chair
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